

Atlanta owes a debt to 'Phantom of the Fox'

Joe Patten, who helped keep iconic theater open, died Thursday.

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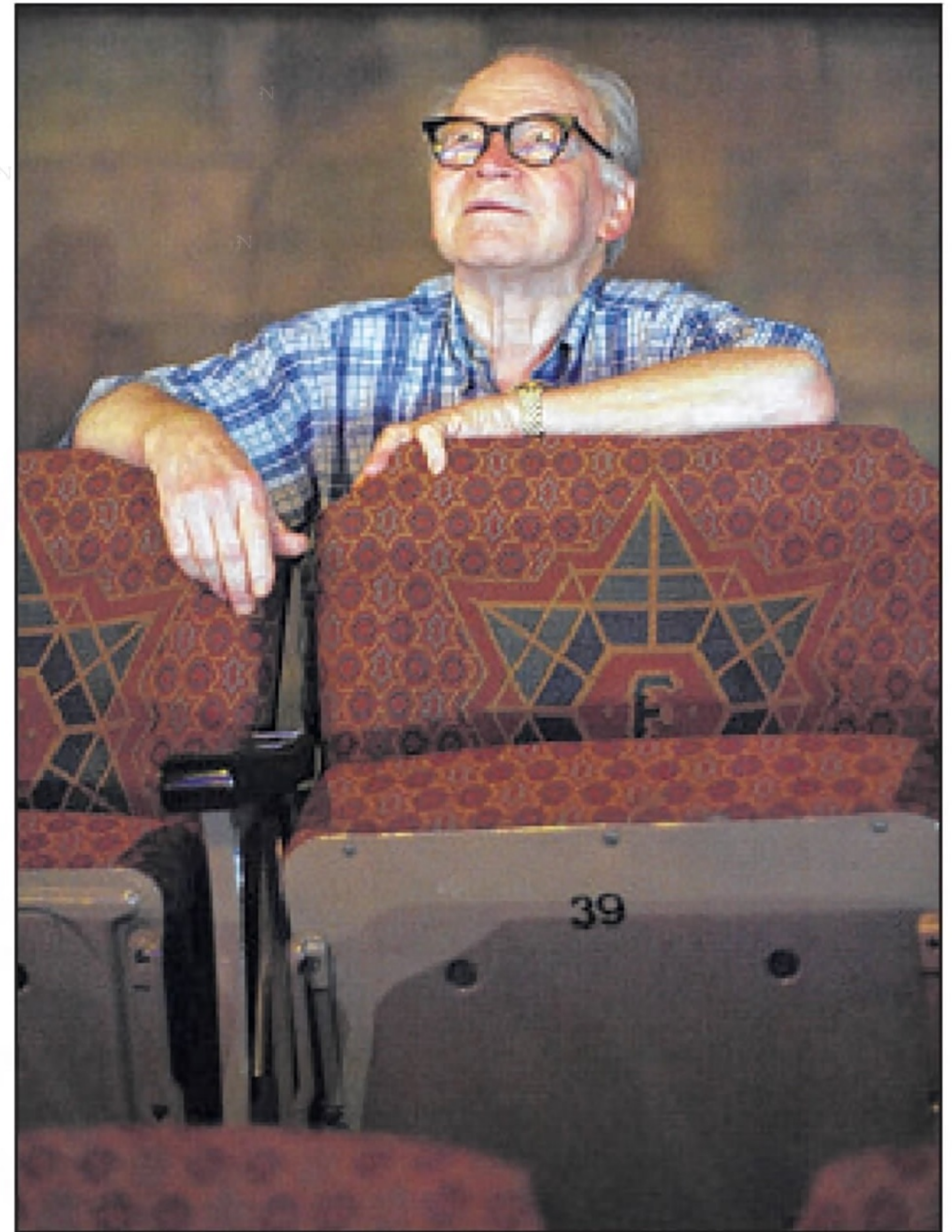
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In a city that, at times, seems to love tearing down its history, Joe Patten stood in the way of "progress."

He helped form Atlanta Landmarks in 1974 to prevent the demolition of the Fox Theatre; it was in line to make way for the former Southern Bell's headquarters. Years later, after a fire broke out in the magnificent movie palace, he led firefighters to the flames and, once again, the Fox was spared.

The theater's past technical director also reconditioned the old pipe organ, dubbed "Mighty Mo," in the 1960s.

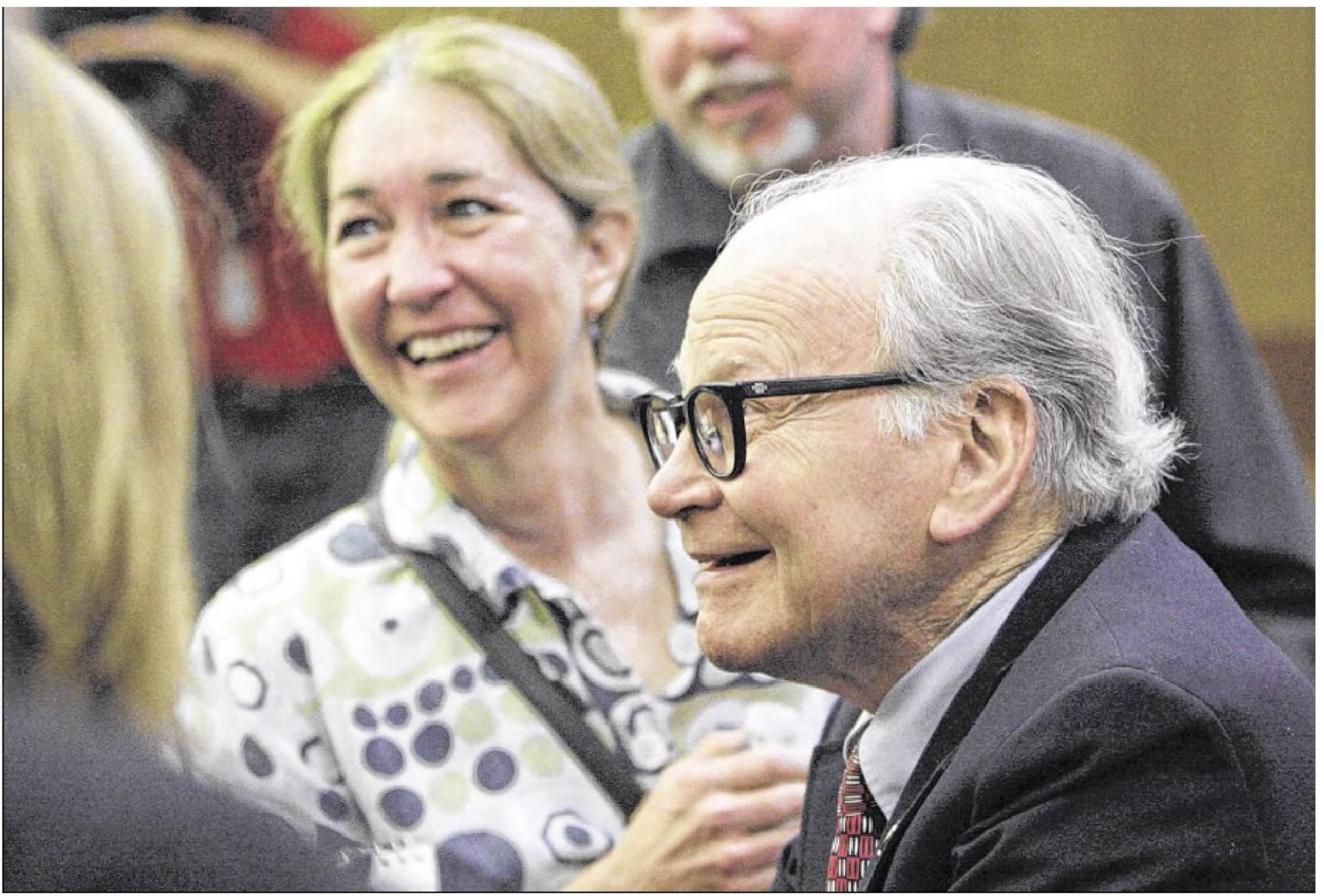
Patten, 89, died Thursday at



Joe Patten sits in his beloved Fox Theatre. BEN GRAY / AJC FILE

Emory University Hospital Midtown. Family spokesman Vince Dollard said the man known as the "Phantom of the Fox" passed away "surrounded by family and friends and listening to his favorite

Patten continued on **D5**



Joe Patten, with friend Lucinne Grimes celebrate after an agreement was reached that allowed him to remain in his Fox Theatre apartment. BOB ANDRES / AJC FILE

Patten

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organ music.”

While details of a private family service and public memorial were still coming together Friday, friends were flooding social media channels with heartfelt tributes.

“In 1974 when I learned the Fox was going to be demolished, my family and I drove downtown to see it one last time,” Mark Cash wrote on the theater’s public Facebook page. “We stood at the door and peered into the dark and abandoned structure. After a while a little man appeared and asked if we would like to come in. Joe Patten gave us a flashlight tour of the Fox from top to bottom. I was 19 at the time and will never forget that experience.”

“Joe did so much for Atlanta and for the Fox! We would not have the fabulous Fox if he had

not led the fight to keep it, or call the fire department the night it almost burned down,” Lynn Cory Lawton wrote. “We have so much to thank Joe for. Our wonderful ‘mighty Mo’ is all because of our Mighty Joe! I know there is a special place in heaven for Joe!”

Ken Double, president and chief executive of the American Theatre Organ Society, called Patten one of the most significant and influential people in the world of the pipe organ.

“A true trailblazer, his work in the 1960s in bringing the great Moller organ back to life was inspirational to our movement across the country,” Double said. “That those beginnings with the organ helped generate his work toward saving the great theater itself is testament to the man’s energy, dedication and foresight.”

Patten’s long love affair with the Fox wasn’t without some snags. In 2010, he filed a lawsuit against

the group he helped form after Atlanta Landmarks sent him a letter suggesting he find an assisted-living residence. He had signed a 1979 lease allowing him to live in renovated office space in the theater rent-free for the rest of his life, but the Fox’s board of trustees voted to change that lease, saying Patten could live there “as long as he is able.” At the time of the lawsuit, Patten had medical issues but said he was still able to live alone in his home of more than 30 years.

The lawsuit ultimately was dismissed in a settlement and Patten spent the rest of his life in his cherished Fox.

“I’m certainly delighted for this day to come and end up like it is,” Patten said at the time. “We’ll get back to the Fox and make sure that the Fox carries on, hopefully in a very successful manner.”